



# Reducing race gap in birth outcomes focus of new initiative being led by YWCA of Kalamazoo's CEO

Infant Mortality

Grace Lubwama, CEO of the YWCA of Kalamazoo, is leading an effort -- the Kalamazoo Infant Mortality Community Action Initiative -- that seeks to improve birth outcomes in Kalamazoo County. (*Kalamazoo Gazette file*)

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**KALAMAZOO, MI** – When she moved from

Grace Lubwama

Kalamazoo Gazette file

Boston to California's Antelope Valley in 2003,

Grace Lubwama was struck that **birth outcomes**

**for black infants** there were worse than in her native Uganda.

"I was like, really?" said Lubwama, who was executive director for Antelope Valley Partners for Health in Lancaster, Calif. "In the United States, with all of these resources?"

At the time, the black infant mortality rate in the Antelope Valley was 32.7 deaths per 1,000 births. Lubwama led an effort that, as of today, has helped reduce that figure to nine deaths per 1,000 births and reduced the disparity between black and white infant mortality.

"We came together as a community, looked at what resources do we have and where are the gaps," said Lubwama, **who became chief executive officer of the YWCA of Kalamazoo last November.**

Now, Lubwama wants to bring her experience attacking infant mortality to bear in Kalamazoo. On Friday, Nov. 21 she will help launch the Kalamazoo Infant Mortality Community Action Initiative, aimed at ensuring that every child in Kalamazoo County, regardless of race, has the same chance of seeing their first birthday.

Lubwama said the YWCA will be "the backbone" of the initiative, supported by other key community stakeholders, including Kalamazoo County Health and Community Services, Bronson Methodist Hospital, Borgess Medical Center and Western Michigan University Homer Stryker M.D. School of Medicine.

The initiative will start with analyzing data, assessing resources and programs available to infants and mothers and putting in place strategies intended to bring measurable short-term and long-term change.

"It's going to take the whole community ... to be strategic in closing the gaps that we have," Lubwama said. "Let's come and work together and not create another problem, but really look at the assets we have in this community

and who else needs to be a part of that conversation."

The initiative could not come at a better time, according to health officials who are trying to reduce infant mortality in Kalamazoo County.

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Catherine Kothari, an assistant professor in epidemiology and biostatistics at WMed, points out that while the overall infant mortality rate in Kalamazoo County has dropped

from 10.2 per 1,000 births for 2001-03 to 6.4 for 2010-12, disparities based on race and poverty have grown over that period.

Michigan Department of Community Health statistics show that for the years 2001-03, for every white infant who died before their first birthday, 2.3 black infants died before age 1. By 2010-12, that disparity had nearly doubled, with 4.5 black infant deaths to every one white infant death.

The disparity between infants born to mothers who are poor and those who aren't has also grown. For 2001-03, there were 2.1 babies born to poor mothers for every one not born into poverty. For 2010-12, that ratio grew to 2.9, state statistics show. Kothari also points out that among black mothers in Kalamazoo County who gave birth from 2010-12, 85 percent were poor.

"One story is, overall, we've actually made really good strides and we're pretty close to the national rate" for infant mortality, Kothari said. "The problem is not everyone has seen the gains. The racial gap and the poverty gap has grown over this exact same period of time."

An deeper look at numbers – 13 years worth – show an even clearer picture of infant mortality in Kalamazoo County. MDCH figures show that from 2000-12, the county's mortality rate for white infants was 5.7 deaths per 1,000 births, compared to 18.2 deaths per 1,000 births for black infants.

While the figures for black infant mortality are sobering, the push by the YWCA comes at a time when resources for infants and families are growing locally, said Debra Lentz, division manager for maternal and child health programs at Kalamazoo County Health and Community Services.

Healthy Babies Healthy Start, a program aimed at reducing racial disparities in infant and maternal health, has received another five years worth of federal funding and home visitation programs are growing, including the Nurse-Family Partnership of Kalamazoo County and Healthy Families America. Additional funding from the United Way also is assisting the Parents as Teachers program, Lentz said.

"I am energized by (Lubwama's) enthusiasm and her willingness to take on the challenge," Lentz said. "And sometimes we do need a new champion, somebody who does look at that and says, 'This is not right for our community, it's not right for our children to die of things that are preventable.'"

When Lubwama talks about the successes in Antelope Valley in reducing infant mortality, she points to two factors - programs instituted there were "culturally sensitive" and included a diverse set of staff members who began working with black mothers and their babies.

She said officials quickly identified that the main hurdle for black mothers there was access to proper medical and prenatal care and responded by opening more health clinics and increasing the number of medical providers.

"In California, it was easy," Lubwama said. "In Kalamazoo, it's hard to point (at) what is causing the high infant mortality rate ... In Kalamazoo right now, I don't know what we could point to that is causing the disparities.

"We are the community of The Promise ... but then there are a number of children whose reality is they're never going to celebrate their first birthday."

Lubwama said a goal of the initiative being launched by the YWCA will be to pinpoint what is causing the racial and economic disparities in infant mortality and then "address this issue with the current resources that we have."

Kothari said reasons for the disparity between white and black infant deaths in Kalamazoo County may be rooted in structural barriers that may be "a little invisible to the eye." She points, for example, to challenges black residents may have getting quality medical care or housing, in addition to what she said is "flat out discriminatory behavior."

"There's something about the fact of being black in Kalamazoo that carries risk," Kothari said. "The mechanism, regardless of where it comes from ... it leads to stress and you're living in chronic stress and the body responds to stress by weathering and it ages you ... it has physiological costs."

Those costs, she said, may include premature deliveries and babies born sick and with low birth weight, which are risk factors for infant mortality.

Despite the challenges, Kothari said she is excited about the effort being led by Lubwama, who she said is picking up where Dr. Arthur James, a former Kalamazoo physician and advocate for reducing racial and economic disparities in birth outcomes, left off.

"(James) went away and we lost our focus and our champion, and there was a lack of sustainable effort. We've got even more resources, the issue is that if there is not a deliberate focus on disparities and the reason for disparities ... then you aren't necessarily targeting your efforts, and if you're not monitoring disparities, look what happens -- they get worse," Kothari said.

"(Lubwama) is sort of walking in the steps of Dr. James in that she's a champion ... What we do is going to be driven by what the community wants to do ... The community is the driver."

*Rex Hall Jr. is a public safety reporter for the Kalamazoo Gazette. You can reach him at **[rhall2@mlive.com](mailto:rhall2@mlive.com)**. Follow him on **Twitter**.*

## **If You Go**

### **YWCA of Kalamazoo presents the Kalamazoo Infant Mortality Community Action Initiative**

**When:** 9 to 11:30 a.m., Friday, Nov. 21

**Where:** WMU Homer Stryker M.D. School of Medicine, 300 Portage St., Kalamazoo

**Contact:** Jennifer Frank Brenton at 269-345-5595 or [jfbrenton@ywcakalamazoo.org](mailto:jfbrenton@ywcakalamazoo.org)

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